



# Fortune is a Woman: Machiavelli on Luck and Virtue

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**Abstract** Machiavelli explains the success of princes by referring to their *virtù*, or prowess, which overcomes the vagaries of fortune. I pay attention to the meaning of *virtù*, which some commentators claim to be a clear and understandable term, others deny this. If *virtù* is defined in terms of fortune, we have reasons to be skeptical. The problem is that fortune is a concept of many meanings in *The Prince*. Some of these are mythological, such as the goddess Fortuna and fortune as a woman. Machiavelli seems to use the concept of fortune in four different ways: resource, fate or destiny, chance, and uncertainty. I provide evidence for this thesis. I analyze these ideas and try to relate them to each other. *The Prince* is a conceptually loose treatise.

**Keywords** Machiavelli, luck, virtue, fortune

## 1. The Political Animal

Niccolò Machiavelli's famous political vision is too metaphorical, rhetorical, and in a sense fictional to qualify as good philosophy. Alternatively it is a grand political theory which leads us beyond the limits of narrow analytical understanding and to the world of lofty metaphysics of effective action, politics, and social power. It paints a picture of the political realm as a battlefield where some exceptional individuals may survive, if they play their cards right. Otherwise, they perish. But they do not perish alone. With them goes into oblivion their principalities or city states. Actually, in this grand perspective, it may not make much sense to draw a distinction between the prince and his city-state. The man is not only for the state but he is the state. The prince does not exist without the state and the state must perish without him.

However, may Machiavelli also speak as if he would like to maintain this distinction, as if the man, the prince, and his realm, the state, would be two different things? But all this is a rhetorical illusion, created with a skillful hand, designed to deceive the reader. Actually the man and his realm are not two separate entities. They belong together, they live together, and they die together. Why would someone risk everything to possess a city-state and guarantee its safety in that universal war that was Renaissance Italy? Why would the successful men be so extraordinary individuals? Why should they battle against all the odds in such monomaniac manner dedicating their lives to one noble cause only. They have no ethics, no religion, no happiness, and no life to live, except when they struggle to maintain that most elusive of all possessions, power.

However, one might even argue that they have no power. They need power. If they had power they would be safe, and they could relax and see themselves as individual persons free of their constrictive roles as princes and rulers. But they have no power. On the contrary, they struggle all the time to stay alive, alone in the world that entitles them to minimal value and guarantees them nothing. They are as weak and powerless as their states which survive for a while and then collapse. A new prince comes and tries his hand on power. History runs its course and these brave men flourish and get destroyed along with it. They are their own city-states. Their destinies are tied together in a way which we can understand only through the historical narrative which tells their story.

The explanation of powerlessness is metaphysical. A person may not have much power against the ruthless fate and the forces of time and history.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is hope as the ancient Roman World and its enduring success shows.<sup>2</sup> It is not impossible to survive and even flourish. But Machiavelli's own Italy is different. Its princes battle endlessly and try their personal luck against foreign barbarian and local competitors, unable to expect much success. They must be swift, ruthless, violent, and clever.<sup>3</sup> Because they

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<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli writes: "Time sweeps everything along and can bring good as well as evil, evil as well as good." (*The Prince*, p. 40). This aphorism may entail fatalism, which does not look like Machiavelli's characteristic attitude. On the contrary, a prince can influence his times. As we will see, he can fight against his own destiny.

<sup>2</sup> See Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, Book Two.

<sup>3</sup> The difference between cruelty and ruthlessness is all important when we discuss *virtù*. The prince must not be cruel, otherwise he has no moral virtue, no honor, and he is not entitled to glory. It is unclear if this is meant as an ethical statement or instrumental advice. Is the disvalue of cruelty intrinsic or extrinsic? Anyway, Machiavelli condemns cruelty, which entails excessive violence which is too dear to the perpetrator. He enjoys it. Ruthlessness is different as it means courageous determination. The prince must do what is necessary to be successful, but he must respect certain limits. (See Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. XVII). Yet the reputation

have no power, they need to act. Power allows you to assert your own will, to stop, relax and look around. Machiavelli's prince can never relax. He moves, plans, and acts all the time. He is a creature of strategy and cunning whose only interest is survival.

Such a meager goal is the *causa finalis* of political life, and at the same time, perhaps, the reason why politics has always been despised by those who have real power, religious, intellectual, or even traditional political power. Just to survive does not seem to be much, but when we read Machiavelli the lesson to learn is that we should appreciate it over any other goal. Survival is of course a necessary condition of all other goods, such as good life and happiness, but it is more. But why is the survival of this given state so crucial? Why would the citizens be happy in another state? What does it matter which one is the state where they live? Machiavelli seems to say that the state is happy and able to live a good life. It is not its citizen but its very existence which is at stake. The state has intrinsic value to a person like Machiavelli. When a state collapses, it is not only a necessary condition of the happiness of its citizens which is lost. The state itself has intrinsic values and thus it is too valuable to be lost. Survival is not only survival; it is everything. And then there is glory (see n. 3).

All animals seek for survival. Of course Machiavelli compares his princes to different types of animals. They are animals in their relentless urge to live and survive in changing circumstance in the middle of other animals. Their wisdom is of the animal kind which is more than understandable. Compare these two quotations. First, a Roman emperor is mentioned and discussed as a lion and a fox:

So whoever carefully studies what this man [Severus] did will find that he had the qualities of ferocious lion and a very cunning fox, and that he was feared and respected by everyone, yet not hated by the troops. ... Severus, an upstart, proved himself able to maintain such great power. (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p 110).

Next, Machiavelli's own Italy is different. Its leaders are not lions and foxes but, as it seems, mere asses. Machiavelli tries to explain the weakness of Italian leaders as follows. The main point is clear, yet it is easy to see that the following quotation is problematic:

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for cruelty may sometimes be good (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 97). There is something tragic here: the prince may need to be cruel but that stains his reputation. He has two possibly incompatible motives, namely, desire for glory and a mission to keep his principality alive. This cannot be so. Survival itself is glorious. Is it really enough to survive, or does the prince want to survive gloriously? Would he rather perish than survive without glory? – See also *The Discourses*, I.27, and Holler 'The Prince and the Law', Ch. D.

All this is because of the weakness of the leaders. Those who are wise are not obeyed. Everyone imagines he is competent, and hitherto no one has had the competence to dominate the others by means of his prowess and good fortune. As a result of this, over so long a time, in so many wars during the past twenty years, when there has been an all-Italian army, it has always given a bad account of itself ... (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 136) (I have modified the translation here; my thanks are due to Dr. Heta Gylling).

To read this text correctly we need to make a distinction between those who are wise and those who are capable. It is not clear that the original Italian text does so, yet we need to do so anyway. How could anyone be capable if he is not obeyed? Thus, we do want to translate like this: 'Those who are competent are not obeyed'. If we do so, Machiavelli's main point is lost. What Machiavelli seems to mean is that capable leadership entails obedience and therefore power; if the leader is not obeyed, he is *not* capable and he must fail. In Italy, no such capable leaders can be found. Nevertheless, wise men exist but they are not obeyed – mere wisdom is not enough to constitute power. No one needs to follow Minerva's Owl regardless of his superior wisdom. Machiavelli makes a valid point here.

In the glorious Roman past some men exhibited prowess, or *virtú*, and deserved their good luck, or *fortuna*. They had both *virtú* and Madam *Fortuna* on their side. This is a winning combination. They were animals, and very strange animals they were. They were like centaurs and chimaeras who are put together of sets of mutually incongruous parts. Severus is at the same time a lion and a fox, exhibiting qualities which any storyteller would reserve to two different and separate kinds of creatures. In order to succeed you need to be a very improbable animal, which do not exist in Machiavelli's Italy.<sup>4</sup>

Now men are men; they are no longer fictional creatures of imagination. They imagine they are competent but when they act it is evident that they have no *virtú* and not much luck. They struggle and lose, powerless but for ever trying to turn the tables. All they do is to give a bad account of themselves. Power was available to Severus a long time ago but for moderns it is a mere illusion based on one's uncontrollable imagination. Men are no longer animals. They know too much, they imagine too much, they are under too many constraints, and they fail because of all this. They are no longer mythical creatures of the past, unfamiliar combinations of foxes and lions. Yet they should do something to survive together with their principalities. They are their states, and when they fail and collapse everything is lost. Foreign barbarians will come and dominate. The ultimate threat is

<sup>4</sup> But see Holler, 'Exploiting *The Prince*', on the interesting case of Cesare Borgia, p. 428.

alienation and loss of identity. 'We' are then no longer citizens as we will turn into barbarians, which is a fate worse than death.

Machiavelli fights against the ideas of alienation and otherness which he can see in the yawning dark abyss he is constantly facing. When he thinks of the coming of the barbarians, he suffers from vertigo which he can control only by clutching power, luck, and virtue as talismans. He thinks a prince can have hope, he never denies this, but then the measures the prince uses must be absolutely extraordinary. The task is nearly impossible and so is the man who can win not only in adverse circumstances but who can win over the vagaries of *fortuna*. One cannot win without good luck but one cannot have good luck if one does not deserve it. This is a strange idea but *The Prince* loses its keystone argument if *fortuna* is denied its role.

The stakes are high so the measures against bad fortune must always be forceful and extreme. The battle reaches cosmic proportions simply because it is a symbolic equivalent of the end of the world, Armageddon, a cosmic catastrophe which rages till the paradise comes back to earth. It is a battle for the new Rome, if not New Jerusalem. Hence Machiavelli's deepest hopes are messianic; the second coming may be near when the time is ripe. He lives in the waiting of a new prince which can save Italy:

I asked myself whether in present-day Italy the times were propitious to honor a new prince, and whether the circumstances existed here which would make it possible for a prudent and capable man to introduce a new order, bringing honour to himself and prosperity to all and every Italian. ... I cannot imagine there ever was a time more suitable than the present. (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 133-134).

## 2. The Meaning of *Virtú*

Some amusing things have been said of Machiavelli's political mythology and his political animals. They are not easy to interpret because Machiavelli is not a philosopher in the traditional sense of the term. He did not like philosophers. He writes like one and then he moves on to preaching salvation. His concepts are equally flexible when he first analyses them and then resorts to allegory and even mythology. Quentin Skinner and George Bull (the translator of the Penguin edition of *The Prince*) directly contradict each other about the definition of *virtú*. What else should one expect? And *virtú* is not the most enigmatic of the concepts Machiavelli uses.

Skinner writes as follows:

It is often complained that Machiavelli fails to provide any definition of *virtú*, and even that (as Whitfield puts it) he is 'innocent of any systematic use of the word.' But it will now be evident that he uses the term with complete consistency. Following his classical and humanist authorities, he treats it as that quality which enables a prince to withstand the blows of Fortune, to attract the goddess's favour, and to rise in consequence to the heights of princely fame, winning honour and glory for himself and security for his government. (Skinner, *Machiavelli*, p. 35).

Bull contradicts Skinner:

A great deal has been written about the Renaissance concept of *virtú*, but Machiavelli, like his contemporaries, seems to have used it freely and loosely, nearly always in antithesis to *fortuna*, sometimes with the sense of willpower, sometimes efficiency, sometimes even with the sense of virtue. (Bull's Introduction to his translation of *The Prince*, p. 25).

As Skinner recognizes, this controversy is a real one; yet it is not easy to see why Skinner says that *virtú* has a clear and consistent meaning if its definition rests on an account of the mythical female goddess, Fortuna. If you explain the concept by means of a reference to a goddess, its meaning cannot be too clear. For instance, I understand how one can withstand the results of bad luck but I really do not understand how one can deserve good luck. But perhaps Skinner wants to say that these ideas define princely virtue regardless of how we understand their details. In the same way it can be said that God is a necessary being regardless of whether we understand what a necessary being means. But this is to say that we do not know what God is, and this entails meaninglessness. The rule is that what explains must be clearer than the thing explained. But nothing can be less clear than the role of Madame Fortuna in *The Prince*.

In fact Bull refers to Fortuna too; and in that respect Skinner and Bull agree. I would say that any definition of a term which logically entails indefinable terms is not acceptable as 'completely clear and consistent.' When we try to understand *virtú* we are also talking about *fortuna*, and if we do not understand *fortuna*, we do not understand *virtú*. Can we say with a clear conscience that we know what *fortuna* means in Machiavelli's texts? Bull is right when he contrasts *virtú* to *fortuna*, and if Skinner agrees he should not say that the concept is clear or it is used only in one way.

But what does *fortuna* mean? Once we have answered this question we begin to understand what *virtú* means. Bull translates it as prowess, which is a good choice. But when we realize that the princely prowess means one's

capability and success against bad luck, we are lost. If we said that prowess means one's ability to defeat one's enemies and reach one's goals over a wide range of political circumstances, the case would be much clearer. However, *fortuna* must be mentioned too, simply because Machiavelli does so in *The Prince* where he ties *fortuna* and *virtú* together. As I said above, this is a cosmic, apocalyptic, and mythological text. It is not philosophy. It is not simply a guidebook for princely pretenders. It is a cosmic allegory of the glory of power surrendered and regained, and of the paradise lost.

My own view is that the meaning of *fortuna* can be understood by looking at different contexts where Machiavelli uses the term; yet no clear-cut meaning emerges from this exercise. It is true that Machiavelli uses *fortuna* in many different ways, and thus the meaning of *virtú* will remain equally open. In a rhetorical and ultimately poetical work this does not create any problems. If the *The Prince* were a political manual and a guidebook the situation would be much worse. If you do not understand what its key terms mean, you cannot follow its advice. But *The Prince* does not suffer from such an alleged defect; on the contrary, the text utilizes such ambiguities in full and draws its readers into an exciting adventure which can be felt more than understood. This fact explains its enduring historical success: the text is deep, deeper than its readers think and understanding ever can be. It plays with our emotions because we cannot understand.

### 3. *Fortuna* – Its Use and Meanings

The reader of *The Prince* may want to assume an analytical standpoint and try to say that Machiavelli really means. Some progress can be made, as I want to show now. Machiavelli uses the concept of *fortuna* in several different ways in *The Prince*. The following four main meanings can be identified: resource, fate or destiny, chance, and uncertainty. I try to offer evidence for such a classification below. I explain all this as systematically as possible. I also discuss each from the point of view of its mythological and poetic import. Some of the contexts and usages are fully mytho-poetic, which casts a shadow over Skinner's claims about the definition of *virtú*, or prowess. We will see that only the second and perhaps the third meaning are directly relevant to the definition of *virtú*, if *virtú* is defined in antithesis to *fortuna*, as Bull puts it.

#### 3.1 *Fortuna as a Resource*

The first meaning does not help us define *virtú* at all, and the last one is semantically relevant only indirectly. The first meaning of *fortuna*, a resource,

is simply an alternative to *virtú*, as amazing as it may sound. 'Fortune' means in English language (good) luck or a large amount of money and property. Perhaps this linguistic ambiguity is not merely coincidental. Fortune can be a resource just like money and property, at least at the level of fiction and myth. Prezzolini writes as follows:

One thing is, however, certain. For Machiavelli Fortune never means what it did for Dante (...), that is the minister of God, guided by Him, the dispenser of earthly goods which men, because of their blindness, do not see as a rational force. In other words, Machiavelli's Fortune does not correspond to a divine and rational design. (Prezzolini, *Machiavelli*, pp. 67-68).

Grazia seems to say the same about such a mysterious and 'perverse being' as luck: 'It is the most serious threat to political action,' that is, it certainly is not a hidden rational plan. Then he says: 'Dominions are acquired, among other ways, "by fortune or by virtue".' (Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, pp. 202-203). Notice how clumsily these two sentences fit together: if one can acquire a dominion by means of fortune, it cannot be a threat to one's successful political action. If we talk about a threat we never acquire an important value by means of it. A treat cannot be a means to something good. A threat is a threat. This shows how difficult it is to paint the picture of Fortuna and sketch her role in political affairs without saying something implausible.

Let us try to find evince for the resource view of (good) fortune. I already quoted Machiavelli above; in his words, 'competence to dominate the others by means of his prowess and good fortune' place *virtú* and *fortuna* in parallel positions as means and resources to be used in order to be successful in battle and politics (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p.136). One can put *fortuna* to use, just like one uses one's specious *virtú*. This may sound strange, but I am sure this is one of the normal and traditional uses of '(good) fortune' and 'luck'. It is almost like a mythological way of thinking which is preserved to our day, although one would well be advised not to mention it in any discursive or theoretical manner in a serious context. Somehow I would love to be able to be lucky in the sense that I could *use* my good luck to be successful. Of course I know this is not the case, but I still dream about it. I am a lucky person, which is to say that I have that rare resource at my disposal. Perhaps such an idea is somewhat childish or atavistic. One dreams of success and thinks that the whole world is on his side; as if he were the center of the universe whose purpose it is to serve him.

Machiavelli writes: 'A prince wins them [dominions] either with the arms of others or his own, either by fortune or by prowess.' (Machiavelli, *The*



*Prince*, p. 33). This quotation is from the opening paragraph of *The Prince*, which gives it special importance. It is fortunate to be able to benefit from the arms of others, or from something which does not belong to him. In this case the prince is lucky, and he wins by means of his luck. This shows that it is possible to win by means of luck. This does mean, however, that one can use luck to win, if one just happens to be lucky. To have good luck and to use it are indeed two different things. The former is an ad hoc idea which comes to your after the dust kicked up by action settles. In the Hegelian sense it is also a philosophical attitude because the Owl of Minerva flies only at dusk. After the action is over – if you won – you can call yourself lucky. But never call yourself lucky before the action starts; this makes no sense at all. Luck is always attributed to a person ad hoc and post hoc.

Machiavelli resorts here to his most powerful mythological imagery, Fortuna as a woman. And by so doing he shows that he is not a philosopher who would respect the rules of language and the grammar of words:

I hold strongly to this: that it is better to be impetuous than circumspect; because fortune is a woman and if she is to be submissive it is necessary to beat and coerce her. Experience shows that she is more often subdued by men who do this than by those who act coldly. (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 133).

It is, so to speak, possible to exploit fortune and the services of Fortuna, or Lady Luck. Notice that empirical evidence supports the view that it is better to act impetuously, or rush to action and take one's chances, than to wait. This is to exploit *fortuna* as a resource. All this is wishful thinking of course, or an atavistic dream, but Machiavelli's account of luck would not be complete without it. His prince may feel like gambler who goes to roulette table in order to make a large sum of money. He assures himself that he can use the wheel to his own advantage. It may even represent his only chance to get rich. He should not do it because the odd are against him. Bad bets are not recommendable. Of course, rashness has its benefits, for instances it may be surprising to others, but this not a matter of luck but quite normal psychology.

Machiavelli says that there are two ways of becoming a prince, 'by prowess or by fortune.' He continues: 'duke Valentino, acquired his state through the good fortune of his father, and lost it when that disappeared.' Later Machiavelli writes: 'So whoever studies that man's [Agathocles] actions will discover little or nothing that can be attributed to fortune ...' (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 54 and p. 63). Here fortune is again a resource which may disappear, and then one is in trouble. Agathocles, on the contrary, is a man who refuses to use luck; he does not need it. He is so

resourceful that *fortuna*, as an additional resource, is not needed. He does not want that woman. Notice how strange it is to say that one can win by good luck only, even if one has no ability. Of course this may happen but it has no systematic meaning or foundation.

I would not recommend a stupid, weak, and indecisive person to attack his strongest enemy only because he thinks today is his lucky day. In Rome heroes had their priests to read the good omens from animal intestines or the flight of the birds, and in that sense luck had its proper foundations, once upon the time. In Machiavelli's time luck could not be made predictable by any methods or texts. Perhaps the whose idea of *Fortuna* as a resource is based on such a Roman idea of augurs reading the texts of omens right and thus controlling what we today call luck. This is to say that our luck is not quite the same as their luck. Machiavelli wants to live a life of the Romans which explains *The Discorsi* and some of his ideas concerning *fortuna*.

### 3.2 *Fortune as Fate and Destiny*

The following view presented by Crick is puzzling but interesting:

By now it should be clear that in no sense can Machiavelli be called a determinist. Indeed, he constantly praises free actions; only, he insists, actions take place in some social and historical context. Necessity narrows the range of alternatives, but choices have to be made. Further, it is possible by reason applied to experience to make meaningful generalizations (...) about how likely certain types of action are to succeed in certain types of circumstance (but even then, there is always *Fortuna*). (Crick, Introduction to his edition of *The Discourses*, p. 61).

*Fortuna* is now something like a side constraint of action understood as fate or destiny, the blind force of necessity, and it becomes the main obstacle to the prince's successful action. Crick first rejects this view, which is understandable, but then he goes all the way to a kind of unfounded voluntarism. He says that Machiavelli is in 'no sense' a determinist, but in the end of the quotation *fortuna* is re-introduced as a deterministic element. *Fortuna* is a kind of necessity. One can do absolutely nothing to bad luck. Think of the time perspective again: one cannot change the past, and the considerations of luck always look back in time. There everything is what it is, and all is beyond alteration. This is luck as necessity, or as well fate and destiny – yet it does not entail determinism.

Of course it is true that a prince must make choices, and it is equally true that the success rate of these choices is always dependent on luck. He can plan his actions, this is trivially true, and he may succeed in spite of some

bad luck, this is also true. But it is still difficult to see how 'necessity narrows the range of alternatives.'<sup>5</sup> Causal conditions restrict our actions, of course, but they are not necessary constraints. The only possible interpretation which I can find here is to say that some alternatives are too dangerous to try. Some political and military moves, given their social and historical context, are so risky that they should not be attempted. Whatever the action is, it may be successful, but in some cases the agent judges the odds to be negligible. He must not act, although he might get lucky and succeed. Anything can happen, but only a fool bets on it.

Fortune means here fate and blind destiny, or pure negativity which fails you and makes all your plans void.<sup>6</sup> In this sense Fortuna gets a pseudo-deterministic interpretation, although such a formulation may be dangerously misleading. Nevertheless, it has its important message as well. When luck is understood as pure negativity it is destiny which can be understood – almost – as a deterministic force. I fight a losing battle against a superior enemy. This case can be interpreted in two ways: it is my bad luck that I find myself in such a desperate situation, and it is my destiny to lose everything. I can do nothing to change the situation. I am doomed. In such a case luck and destiny overlap, or they can be identified. My bad luck turns out to be my destiny. Machiavelli plays with these ideas in many places in the *The Prince*.

Machiavelli writes: 'I believe that it is probably true that fortune is the arbiter of half of the things we do, leaving the other half or so controlled by ourselves. I compare fortune to one of those violent rivers ... there is no possibility of resistance.' (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 130). No possibility of utilizing *fortuna* is mentioned here. *Fortuna* is uncontrollable. Along with this sobering position, the following proposition makes also sense: 'The only sound, sure, and enduring methods of defense are those based on your own actions and prowess.' (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 129). If you can control only approximately half of the success relevant factors, what else can you do but rely on your own capabilities? After acting you hope for success, because you can do nothing else. No man is strong enough to control his own future. It all depends on your fate, as if it were written on the stars. If you step in a mighty river, you are at the mercy of its flow. Or if you do not want to think in this metaphysical manner, you simply admit that there are limits to what you can do and achieve. Some causal factors are beyond control. Their effects can be calculated, if you know how, and they tell

<sup>5</sup> Yet, Machiavelli writes: '... he could not have conducted himself other than the way he did ...' (*The Prince*, p. 60). This is a nicely deterministic formulation, or a mere figure of speech.

<sup>6</sup> In its simplest form it means a disaster: 'You are bound to meet misfortune if you are unarmed ...' (*The Prince*, p. 88).

your destiny. Normally we cannot do those calculations and therefore our destiny and faith look so mysterious. *Fortuna* does not conceal her secrets to man.

It is obvious that such an account of fortune is inconsistent with the one we called luck as a resource. Fifty percent of all situational determinants are beyond my control, as Machiavelli says, and thus it does not make any sense to say that I may rely on my luck or use it for my benefit. The cruel irony of the following story illustrates my case perfectly:

And he himself said to me, the day Julius II was elected, that he had thought of everything that could happen when his father died, and found a remedy for everything, except that he never thought that when he did so he himself would be at the point of death. (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 60).

Notice also the following point: ‘... unless it commands its own arms no principality is secure; rather, it is dependent on fortune, since there is no valour and no loyalty to defend it when adversity comes.’ (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 86-87). Such a principality is at the mercy of hostile forces; nothing can be done.

In sum: I have presented two interpretations of the idea that *fortuna* is one’s destiny. The first was the temporal and second the causal reading of the great book of nature. When one looks back in time one sees everything as it necessarily is and will be forever. But Machiavelli does not seem to focus on this reading as he favors the causal-metaphysical idea of unpredictability of future events. Because the world of events is so impossibly complex place, its course appears to the prince to be his destiny.

### 3.3 *Fortune as Chance*

Here we approach luck and fortune as something which resembles our own contemporary notions. Machiavelli can be seen as a supporter of an idea of chance in a *synchronic* context, in the following sense. Think of the game of Russian roulette. The idea is simple. There are, say, six players, you take a six shooter revolver, you load it with one live cartridge, and finally you turn its drum randomly. The game begins. The first player aims the barrel of the revolver at his temple and pulls the trigger. He either dies or he does not. The drum is turned again into a random position. Then the next player pulls the trigger; so they continue until only one player survives. He is the winner who reaps all the benefits, whatever they happen to be.

The rules of the game are perfectly fair because every player has exactly the same chance of losing his life when he pulls the trigger, at that very

moment, 1/6 to be exact. In this game one cannot exploit *fortuna* in any way. No calculations may help you. One is at the mercy of Lady Luck in the most obvious way, as long as the revolver circulates among the players. The winner may call himself lucky, but only after the game. We often talk about good and bad luck in hindsight, when we mean chance. In the end one player is alive, which means in a synchronic perspective a change of 1/6 for any player to be a winner. The moment and the process must be evaluated separately.

Is the synchronic notion of fortune, one's luck here and now at a given moment of time, really different from the idea of negativity of fate discussed above? It is different at least in the sense that we can now estimate probabilities and calculate the chances. Machiavelli said that fifty percent of our success depends on us, the rest does not. It does not matter how we call this fifty percent – it is there, and that is all we can say about it. Something unexpected is prone to happen, whatever we do and wherever we are. A bullet may hit your armor and bounce off, or it may hit your unprotected parts. If it hurts you, you may still survive. Perhaps you die.

These are general possibilities which cannot be calculated, estimated, or predicted in any way. Everything is possible. Chance is different. In the game of Russian roulette we know exactly what the a priori probabilities are. We just cannot utilize this knowledge in any way. Notice that Machiavelli says that we cannot control more than fifty percent of our life; yet in the game of Russian roulette we are able to control all or nothing: one can refuse to pull the trigger (and live), or one pulls the trigger (5/6 chance of survival). We can control our action but not what happens if we act. Perhaps this is what Machiavelli means but his theory of fifty percent?

Knowledge is not always power. One may know but still be helpless. But, on the other hand, the pure negativity of fortune also means that knowledge may be an ever impossible option. In this sense it is clear that there is a difference between the negativity of luck and synchronic chance. We know how to handle chance and calculate the probabilities, and sometimes we may even utilize this knowledge. If two groups of Russian roulette players invite me to play with them, I must choose the group with the smaller number of players, if the rewards are equal. In this case knowledge is power. But the present notion of synchronic chance applies only to the playing of the game itself; then I am at the mercy of Madam Fortuna.

Machiavelli knows such cases well. His prince must play Russian roulette anyway and then he must be both willing and able to calculate the relevant chances and risks. Machiavelli gives his reader an advice: be prudent,

Then, no government should ever imagine that it can always adopt a safe course; rather, it should regard all possible courses of action as risky. This is the way things are: whenever one tries to escape one danger one runs into another. Prudence consists in being able to assess the nature of a particular threat and accepting the lesser evil. (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 123).

Sometimes one is able to calculate the synchronic chances and their associated risks, and one must do so. It is not enough to know that fifty percent is beyond one's control, and one must be able to do better calculations. Action alternatives must be compared in some rational manner. They are all presented as here-and-now scenarios, they are compared, and the best alternative is chosen. This presupposes that some calculations of chances can be made. If a very harmful scenario is extremely unlikely to happen, it may be considered. If harm is probable, forget it.

The prince must be able to calculate the relevant chances, and then he can plan ahead. After he has made his best possible plan, he can act according to it, and then once again he needs good luck. He knows the odds but not what will actually happen. In two-player Russian roulette the chance of winning is good, but however good it may look, one of the players will be dead in the end. But this is not the same as saying that even the best plan can fail because of some new and unpredictable events and circumstances. Bad weather or an outbreak of venereal disease among troops may turn out to be catastrophic. That is true bad luck but in another sense of the term.

### 3.4 *Fortune as Uncertainty*

We now move from synchronic back to diachronic considerations. The task is to find the best possible action strategy among several alternatives and realize it, thus minimizing the loss or maximizing the gain. Machiavelli seems to anticipate the idea of this kind of planning in terms of expected utility and its theory (see that last quotation above). Once we know what is likely to happen, one should optimize the risk. This can be no surprise as Machiavelli wants to guide the prince through danger and intrigue all the way to success, at least this is the surface message of the *The Prince*. He needs to narrate some strategies of success.

But what is the difference between this fourth meaning of *fortuna* and the third, as described above in the last quotation? Now we are discussing a 'well regulated power to resist her [Fortuna].' We discuss an engineering problem, or our need for 'embankments and dykes built to restrain her.' (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 130-131). Even if the *fortuna* is like 'violent rivers,' it can be controlled. Notice by the way the clumsy metaphor Machi-

avelli uses here: a woman as a violent river. When he calls fortune a woman, Fortuna, he says that a man of *virtú* needs to beat her to submission. This is his most famous allegory but it does not apply here.

The next idea is less known, and it is the one which does not fit the first one. Now Fortuna is a violent river which cannot be controlled but which needs strong borders which keeps her at bay. The symbolism is like that of the river into which you cannot step twice. The river changes all the time but yet its borders remain the same. The river is truly uncontrollable, unlike the river bed. It is remarkable that Machiavelli's Fortuna, Lady Luck, can be coerced and beaten to submission, but she is also an unstoppable force which can only be gently directed to a new path. Fortuna both can be stopped and cannot.

These rather clumsy inconsistencies indicate the manner in which Machiavelli uses the concepts of fortune, and these ways are not always mutually consistent. Now we discuss the constraints, embankments and dykes, which control the ever threatening flow of fortune. Of course, we cannot control *fortuna* – here Machiavelli exaggerates. What he actually means is that the prince controls himself so that he minimizes the threat of bad luck in the long run. The embankments and dykes are his own mental fictions which help him to stay on the right track. Actually the prince evaluates all the risks and calculates his chances, and then he makes the right prudential decisions. When the decisions are made, he realizes the plan as cunningly as he can.

Machiavelli speaks as if we could engineer controls against the vagaries of luck, but he does not really believe in this idea. In his texts, Machiavelli gives some sober advice to princes and asks them to make carefully calculated, balanced choices which minimize the potential losses on crisis situations. When Machiavelli describes crises he means a normal state of affairs. The prince must be ready because the world is threatening and dangerous without exception.

Machiavelli writes as if he wanted to condemn any prince who acts in an overconfident and rash manner. Be flexible and do your calculations right, says he who knows:

This also explains why prosperity is ephemeral; because if a man behaves with patience and circumspection and the time and circumstances are such that this method is called for, he will prosper; but if time and circumstances change he will be ruined because he does not change his policy. ... If he changed his character according to the time and circumstances, then his fortune would not change. (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 132).

The problem is that 'those princes who are utterly dependent on fortune come to grief when their fortune changes.' (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 131). What is Machiavelli saying here? One may take risks when one knows when to do so. Sometimes taking risks pay off better than being too cautious. In other words, the prince must be able to tell which risks are greater and act accordingly. One may attack now or later. The enemy is already strong but may get reinforcements later, and after that the enemy is too strong. So, it is better to attack now, although it is still risky.

If the prince is used to his quick and brash methods, this comes to him naturally. But the next time the situation may have changed. The reinforcements are not coming and the enemy troops are close to rebellion; one should wait a little longer before attacking. But it is difficult for the prince who has always been quick, brash, and successful. Now he forgets the need to control his fortune. He still believes in the idea of coercing Fortune, but in this new situation it is a baneful strategy. He must wait. The chance of success is high now but even higher later, and he knows it. He must control himself and by so doing he can control his fortune. In this case, fortune is not an uncontrollable force nor is it just chance; fortune is now a matter of careful calculations and prudent self-control. In this way one can eliminate the troublesome role of *fortuna* in his one's decisions and reach one's goals with minimal risk.

Luck as minimal uncertainty is an epistemic notion. The prince is able to control his own fate by means of his *virtù*, which is now something else than mere prowess, tried in battle and characterized by decisiveness, courage, and ruthlessness. *Virtù* is now prudence. If you must deal with uncertainty, you must stop being a lion and become a cunning fox. As I said above, these two animals are mutually incompatible. The reasons for this are not so much psychological as they are semantic. If one is to be able to handle successfully such drastic uncertainty which the prince meets in those political situations where conflicts are a life and death issue and in which no rules apply, one needs to be flexible. One needs to be a fox. And foxes flex the language. They read the situation in various ways and evaluate them accordingly. They interpret them. Too much decisiveness turns here into a vice, an opposite of *virtù*. The lion suffers a loss because he does not think.

One needs stubbornness and deliberation. Instead of courage one needs deceptiveness and slyness. Instead of ruthlessness one may need compromise and forgiveness. The prince must do what the situation demands, not what he is used to do or what he is expected to do. He is at the mercy of the situation whose features he cannot control. A lion would not manage it. A fox is needed. In this way uncertainties can be countered by means of knowledge, or know-how of the suitable responses and strategies. The



prince cannot be successful if he always resorts to his customary ways of acting, his favorite attitudes, and traditional ways of behavior. Now the key word is flexibility.

Uncertainty is something one might be able to control, unlike the other forms of fortune. The reason is that uncertainty is an epistemic notion and therefore one is able to take countermeasures against it. When one is uncertain or when a situation contains uncertain elements, one should try to learn more about them and about the possible methods of reducing the uncertainties. This is possible. And once one has done his homework, the situation is less threatening and the risks of a disaster are under control.

Yet this is a form of *fortuna*, simply because whatever one does, the elements of doom will never disappear completely. The residual of loss will remain, and this can be called bad luck. In this sense one is always fighting against bad luck when one deals with uncertainty. But this kind of luck is in some sense controllable. Sometimes luck can be eliminated totally, for instance when one decides not to act at all. Nothing will happen, so there is no risk. In Machiavelli's cruel world, this is hardly a possibility. If there is one deterministic element in it, it is this: the prince must act. And to act is to enter the world of uncertainties.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Machiavelli's *The Prince* contains much material on Lady Luck. She is an ever present threat in the book. He tries many methods against her. They range from absurd to shy: he says that she should be beaten to submissiveness but he says also that she should also be avoided, or eliminated from the situation. Quick and brash action may work but in the long run it is better to be prudential. Risks should be avoided if possible. What happened to *virtú*, to the notion where we started this journey down the river? Does it have a single and unambiguous meaning or not?

The answer must be in the negative. A prince must be virtuous or to have *virtú*, yet he must be prudent and brash. In other words, he must be quick to attack and willing to wait and calculate. Because these two properties are mutually incompatible, *virtú* is an ambiguous term. Notice that it does not make sense to say that the prince must know when to attack and when to calculate, as if this were the one unique essence of *virtú*. It is not because no brash person does so. If you know when to be and when not to be brash, you are not a brash but prudential person. Yet it does not seem that Machiavelli recommended only prudence to his ideal prince. How could he then beat Madame Fortuna to submission?

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